

Omnibus interviews

Gail Trimble

In February and March 2009 Gail Trimble was for two weeks the most famous person in the country as her barnstorming performances on *University Challenge* earned her the nickname ‘the human Google’ and the coveted trophy – before the Corpus Christi team were stripped of the title following a technical irregularity. Here *Omnibus* succeeds where *Hello!* and *Nuts* failed: we speak to Gail about fame, success, and Latin poetry.

Omnibus: *You’re very famous. I was in the Deep South of the USA a few weeks ago, and when I told someone that I taught at Corpus Christi College, he asked if I knew you. What’s it like? Do you get strangers approaching you in the street?*

Gail: Quite often, yes. The people who actually approach me are unfailingly nice and admiring, so I’m always friendly back, but I still find it odd when I’m in a restaurant or on the bus and realise that people are looking at me and nudging each other! I was also amazed by the amount of fan mail I got – even a package from Australia, from someone who wanted me to read his work on ‘occult physics’.

Omnibus: *You seemed to deal with the publicity serenely. What’s the secret?*

Gail: Partly the initial energy and excitement of having people take an interest in me, which carried me through the whole three days in which I actually spoke to the media. After that, as I watched the newspapers continue to recycle stories about me, I wasn’t so serene, but I’d already been filmed by then! Also that while I wanted to emphasize that answering general knowledge questions quickly isn’t the most important thing in the world, I saw no need to apologize for myself either – I knew I’d performed well at a very specific thing I happen to be good at.

Omnibus: *Was there an element of sexism in the media attention? Do you think you’d have had all the hassle if you’d been a man?*

Gail: There was, in one or two ways. Firstly, I don’t think I’d have got the same kind of attention from the blogs to start with if I’d been male – there wouldn’t have been so many comments, both positive and negative, about my appearance. Then when the mainstream media began to take an interest in me, they referred to the blogs, and I was constantly asked

about the gender angle: it seems that being an intelligent woman is something that the media thinks is still an issue worth discussing, though I wonder if that’s a bit self-perpetuating. And then, of course, there was the famous request from *Nuts*, and finding myself described as ‘Sex Trimble’ in the centre spread of *The Daily Star* ...

Omnibus: *What is Jeremy Paxman like in person?*

Gail: Shorter than you expect, and a bit shy. Off-camera he makes a big effort to be friendly to all the teams, but you sense that he’s much happier when he’s behind his desk firing questions at you.

Omnibus: *If you had known where it was going to lead, would you have entered University Challenge?*

Gail: I’d have thought twice about it. I wanted our team to win, but I never expected anything on this scale to happen even if we did – after all, someone wins *University Challenge* every year and there isn’t normally this much fuss!

Omnibus: *You’re writing a commentary on Catullus 64. Can you tell Omnibus readers a little bit about the poem?*

Gail: Catullus is best known for his short poems about love and hate, but 64 is a 400-line miniature epic. It’s enormously appealing, but also very puzzling – its main story is about the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the parents of Achilles, but more than half of it is a description of a picture embroidered on the coverlet of their marriage bed. Catullus describes how the picture shows Ariadne abandoned on Naxos, watching Theseus sail away – and then suddenly this embroidered Ariadne utters a lengthy speech, as if the picture has come to life. Back at Peleus’ and Thetis’ wedding, the Fates sing a song predicting Achilles’ glorious exploits and

early death, and then the whole story stops as abruptly as it began and Catullus laments the decline of civilization since the heroic age, when all these events took place. The poem was particularly influential on Virgil and Ovid, perhaps because they found it perplexing too ...

Omnibus: *How is it that the same poet wrote an elaborate mythological mini-epic like poem 64, and also the naughty poems like 22 (which Monica Gale discusses on the next page)?*

Gail: People often ask how the same Shakespeare could write both *King Lear* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, but Catullus, on a small scale, is even more varied than Shakespeare – if you pick a poem of Catullus at random you might get a love letter, a puerile joke, a hymn, an agonized reflection on a relationship that’s gone wrong, or a story about self-castration, in any number of lines from two to 408. I think he just loved to experiment, and in ancient poetry, where it’s usually very important to make it clear which genre you’re writing in and what sort of a poet you are, that’s very refreshing. But that’s not to say that 22 and 64 have nothing in common. In 22 Catullus says that Sufferus’ poetry is disappointingly clumsy, and you won’t find very much that’s clumsy in 64. Both the poems have surprising endings, too.

Omnibus: *What does writing a commentary involve?*

Gail: A huge range of things. I look at the text on every level of detail, building up from examining the meanings and nuances of particular words – and trying to establish what I think was the text Catullus actually wrote – through looking at the structure of various sections of the poem and their relationships with both earlier and later literature, up to assessing different interpretations of the poem as a whole. Along the way I find myself learning and writing about pictures of sea nymphs, typical ways of addressing a god, very subtle grammatical distinctions and how to make a Roman bra – among other things!

Omnibus: *I assume the next step for you is to get a job teaching Classics in a university. What’s the appeal, for you?*

Gail: The combination of two things that

I enjoy and find extremely rewarding – teaching and research. Both of these involve reading high-quality literature, working hard to increase my understanding of the ancient world, writing, talking, solving problems, sharing my enthusiasm and learning from others – and all within an atmosphere where people are respected for their intellectual achievement, but are also (most of them) intelligent enough to know when not to take themselves too seriously.

***Omnibus:** And finally, The Sun proved that you weren't omniscient. Do you know yet who the manager of Chelsea is?*

Gail: Er, I'll need to confer with my team on that one ...

***Omnibus:** ... I'm going to have to hurry you ... Oh well, out of time! Thanks very much anyway, Gail.*

Gail Trimble is a lecturer at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Tim Whitmarsh put the questions to her.